

Committee on House Administration

Subcommittee on Elections Hearing

“The Importance of Poll Workers: Best Practices and Recommendations”

Testimony of the Honorable Helen Purcell, Maricopa County Recorder

Madam Chair and Members of the Committee;

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I refer you to my written testimony for elaboration and supporting examples of the few key points I would like to address this afternoon.

We expect a lot of our poll workers. They arrive at the polling place before dawn, execute ever increasingly complicated election procedures, and serve as the gateway to the democratic process for all voters who chose to vote at the polls on Election Day. Election administrators understand that providing training and instructional tools to poll workers in order to enable them to execute their responsibilities on Election Day is critical for a successful election. In Maricopa County 83% of our poll workers attended training class for the General Election in 2006. Almost a thousand workers have attained a Premium status by attending 8 additional hours of training. Every election hundreds attend a bilingual training class on providing language assistance to limited English proficiency voters. Yet, training continues to be a challenging facet of conducting an election.

Training responsibilities fall on the local jurisdictions, as they should. Maricopa County has 1142 precincts and hires an excess of 7,000 workers. Regardless of size there are some essential training questions which have universal applications: core curriculum, training formats, on-the-job training materials, training incentive strategies, and program evaluation. The Election Assistance Commission (EAC) has recently published a Poll Worker Guidebook of professional practices which contains a myriad of possible ways to augment an existing program in these areas.

Core Curriculum

Every poll worker in America needs to get instruction on voting equipment operations, polling place procedures, how to provide effective voter assistance, sensitivity training regarding voters with disabilities, and proper security measures. This is a challenge with the multiple types of equipment now present in the polling place as a result of the Help America Vote Act. New technology can be daunting to poll workers. In last year’s General Election we experienced

“poll worker flight” at training class when they saw the new equipment and became overwhelmed with the elevation of our expectations of them.

Equipment is only a single facet of what a poll worker must know. Is the voter in the correct polling place? Which ballot style is the voter to receive? In Arizona we also rely on the worker to implement and uphold our new voter-initiative ID requirements. This means advising the voter that although they may have used their Passport to prove their citizenship when they registered to vote, because it doesn't have an address on it they cannot use it as proof of identity to get a ballot on Election Day. Voters could very easily believe that the worker does not understand the ID requirements when, in fact, they are following the letter of the law.

Training Format

Training formats need to take into consideration varied learning styles with special consideration for adult learners. Some learn by doing. Others learn by reading. Still others learn by pictures and graphics or by hearing the information. An effective program is a combination of training formats as well as access points. Providing classroom, video/DVD, online, and written options allows for potential workers to access the tools they will need in the time leading up to the election.

On-the Job Training

Pre-election training is obviously not enough. Providing tools which the workers can utilize on Election Day as quick reference guides is critical. A practice that we have found to be beneficial is to provide “Duty Cards” which are a truncated, one-page summary of the responsibilities at each position in the voter processing line.

Incentive

If training were mandatory then 1148 workers hired last November in our county would not have been allowed to work. Would our voters have been better served? Prior to serving voters as the County Recorder I worked for the political party as their poll worker recruitment manager. It was not uncommon to lose a few hundred workers in the last week, sometimes the last weekend, before an election making it impossible to get the new workers to a training class. In Arizona our hiring for the Primary is further complicated by Labor Day weekend. For many elections we fill the vacancies by working the phones for 18 hours a day and requiring training attendance would be another yet obstacle in finding workers.

Evaluation

Regardless of the training strategy that is employed its efficacy must be evaluated and tracked. We survey our workers to determine if they felt training prepared them for Election Day and also have Voter Assistance Surveys available to voters. We received more than 8,000 voter

surveys last November; over 98% of the voters responded that the poll workers were helpful. But what happens when they are not, or if they are either unable or unwilling to execute their duties? Many jurisdictions get their workers directly from the political parties and have no ability to dismiss rogue workers or retire those who are no longer able to fulfill what is required of them. Other jurisdictions do not have the ability to hire youth workers who possess the technical savvy necessary in the post-HAVA environment. Budgetary confines can also restrict the quality and quantity of training materials and sessions. It is not always training that is the source of problems.

In closing there is one last element to training that we have not discussed and that is the personal experience working the polls of those who determine what happens in the polls. I require that my staff work as poll workers at least once in their career. While sitting as a member of the Technical Guidelines Development Committee (TGDC) as we worked on recommending Voluntary Voting Systems Guidelines (VVSG) to the EAC, the National Institute of Standards & Technology (NIST) not only Chaired our Committee but provided technical assistance to the production of the Guidelines. So that they could better understand what is already required of our workers, the level of their technical expertise, and the time constraints placed on them, members of the NIST team worked at the polls in the 2006 election. I know that certain requirements which had been proposed were quickly abandoned because of those personal experiences. I might suggest that you ask your staff if they have served as a poll worker and if so what their experience was like. First hand knowledge is indispensable.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share my experiences. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.